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## Academic Publishing: A Faustian Bargain?

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## Academic Publishing: A Faustian Bargain?

### Abstract

This paper documents and shares our experience of navigating the journal-review process. By providing a personal account we aim to provide a piece that will resonate with those who have had similar experiences. We adopted a case-study approach using the reviews of the manuscript by two anonymous reviewers and the authors' responses. The paper confirms the emotive nature of the manuscript-review process and details some of the vagaries associated with the review process, highlighting our frustrations with it. An extensive literature critiquing the manuscript peer-review process exists. This is understandable given the requirement for academics to publish their research findings in peer-reviewed journals. In view of this extensive literature, what is surprising is the dearth of studies detailing how authors have managed to navigate their way through the process.

### Keywords

Author, Manuscript, Peer review, Publication, Review process



# Academic Publishing: A Faustian Bargain?

Grant Samkin<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper documents and shares our experience of navigating the journal-review process. By providing a personal account we aim to provide a piece that will resonate with those who have had similar experiences. We adopted a case-study approach using the reviews of the manuscript by two anonymous reviewers and the authors' responses. The paper confirms the emotive nature of the manuscript-review process and details some of the vagaries associated with the review process, highlighting our frustrations with it. An extensive literature critiquing the manuscript peer-review process exists. This is understandable given the requirement for academics to publish their research findings in peer-reviewed journals. In view of this extensive literature, what is surprising is the dearth of studies detailing how authors have managed to navigate their way through the process.

**Keywords:** author; manuscript; peer review; publication; review process

**JEL Classification:** M40

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*I shall skip the usual point-by-point description of every single change we made in response to the critiques. After all, it is fairly clear that your anonymous reviewers are less interested in the details of scientific procedure than in working out their personality problems and sexual frustrations by seeking some kind of demented glee in the sadistic and arbitrary exercise of tyrannical power over hapless authors like ourselves who happen to fall into their clutches. We do understand that, in view of the misanthropic psychopaths you have on your editorial board, you need to keep sending them papers, for if they weren't reviewing manuscripts they'd probably be out mugging old ladies or clubbing baby seals to death (Baumeister 1992, p915).*

## INTRODUCTION

Universities require academic staff to undertake research as part of their employment contract. Publication of their findings in highly ranked peer-reviewed journals is necessary to add to the body of knowledge, to achieve personal satisfaction, to obtain local and international prestige, to secure promotions, tenure and/or continuing appointments, to be competitive in attracting doctoral students, and to provide credibility when competing for limited research funds. Publication in highly ranked peer-reviewed journals, then, is a prerequisite for academic success (Hojat, Gonnella & Caelleigh 2003). This is particularly important in the Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) or Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) environment, where published research outputs are expected over the period of each performance review. Delays in publishing research findings can negatively affect academic-career prospects (Brinn, Jones & Pendlebury 1998; Lee 2002).

Navigating the peer-review process, as central to achieving publication, is vital to academic success. Unfortunately, careful development of a manuscript does not guarantee an easy ride when attempting to convince journal reviewers of its worthiness for publication. Unrealistic, unintelligible, conflicting and circular reviewer comments, as well as author misinterpretation, make the review process a lottery.

The emotive nature of the peer-review process has ensured that it is extensively covered in the literature of a variety of academic disciplines (see, for example, Agarwal, Echambadi, Franco & Sarkar 2006; Azar 2004; 2005; Bedeian 2003; 2004; Benos, Kirk & Hall 2003; Benos et al. 2007; Beyer, Chanove & Fox 1995; Clark & Wright 2007; Clark, Floyd & Wright 2006; Easton 2007; Frey 2003; 2005; Hamermesh 1994; Hillman & Rynes 2007; Holbrook 1986; Macdonald & Kam 2007; 2008; Miller 2006; Miner 2003; Moizer 2009; Peters 1996; Raelin 2008; Rowland 2002; Rynes 2006a; 2006b; Seibert 2006; Starbuck 2003; Triadafilopoulos 2006; Tsang & Frey 2007; van Teijlingen & Hundley 2002). Real or perceived failings and dissatisfaction with the process are evidenced by extensive literature (Bedeian 2003; Bence & Oppenheim 2004; Benos et al. 2007; Epstein 1995; Fine 1996; Raelin 2008). How to undertake a review has been discussed by several researchers (Kalpakjian & Meade 2008; Provenzale & Stanley 2006); still more have considered strategies to improve the chances of a manuscript's acceptance for publication (Arceci, 2004; Brown 2005; Carraway 2006; El-Serag 2006; Kalpakjian & Meade 2008; Perry, Carson & Gilmore 2003).

Examining the completed manuscript-review process from an author's perspective has, however, received scant attention in the literature. Exceptions include Agarwal, Echambadi, Franco and Sarkar (2006), De Lange (2005) and Seibert (2006). Agarwal, Echambadi, Franco

and Sarkar (2006) and Seibert (2006) are two invited papers that describe the constructive role reviewers can play in the development of an award-winning paper, while De Lange (2005) uses correspondence with the editor of a journal to document the research process from its genesis as ‘a seed’ to publication.

Through documenting and sharing our experience of navigating the peer-review process, we aim for this paper to provide a personal account of and reflection on the practice. By detailing the difficulties associated with navigating the review process, this paper contributes to the limited literature on this issue from the author’s perspective.

The paper is structured as follows: the paper first considers the peer review process and the criticisms of it. Next, it sets out the research design, then describes the review process for the submitted manuscript. Rounding out the paper is the discussion and conclusion.

## THE PEER-REVIEW PROCESS

The peer-review process has been described as the “very heart of scholarly research” (Lee 2002, p9). It is a gatekeeping process that engages experts to evaluate the manuscript’s competence, novelty, accuracy, quality of presentation, relevance of subject matter, and contribution to the literature (Brinn, Jones & Pendlebury 1998; Benos, Kirk & Hall 2003; Hojat, Gonnella & Caelleigh 2003; Thornton 2004; Miller 2006; Provenzale & Stanley 2006; Benos *et al.* 2007; Casadevall & Fang 2009). It provides editors with a basis on which to reject an article, request that it be revised and resubmitted or accept it. More importantly, a thoughtful and carefully crafted review provides constructive criticism while identifying content areas that require further clarification or correction (Berquist 2008). The rationale is to improve journal submissions to ensure that only high-quality manuscripts are published (Berquist 2008; Macdonald & Kam 2007; 2008; Miller 2006; Provenzale & Stanley 2006;).

How manuscript reviewers are selected differs between disciplines. For example, the *American Journal of Roentgenology* currently has 1600 active reviewers (Berquist 2008, p1292), while in a social science such as accounting, reviewers are drawn from the journal’s editorial board (Brinn & Jones 2008; Parker 2007) supplemented by *ad hoc* reviewers. *Ad hoc* reviewers are usually authors whose work is widely cited or who have publications under review or forthcoming with the journal (Hamermesh 1994).

Once the manuscript has been submitted, the editor undertakes an initial review to determine whether it is relevant, adequately written and presented at the right level, and whether it has anything new or unique to contribute to the literature (Clark, Floyd & Wright 2006; Tight 2003; van Teijlingen & Hundley 2002). If the manuscript is unsuitable, the editor communicates this to the author and the submission process may start again with another journal. Any comments made by the editor can be evaluated to determine whether they should be incorporated into the manuscript before future submissions. Should the editor consider the manuscript to have sufficient merit – that is, it fits the journal profile and is adequately written – it is forwarded to at least two reviewers whose identity is not revealed to the author. The editor may provide the reviewers with some guidance and a deadline for the reviews (Tight 2003).

An evaluation document usually accompanies an invitation to review. These generally request the following or similar feedback from reviewers: likely interest in topic; formulation of research question/problem; clarity of objectives; theoretical soundness; methodology and data analysis; organisation and flow of argument; legitimacy of conclusions; and contribution to research area. The evaluation document also requests an overall recommendation. Options

include: accept in current form; accept with minor revisions; major revision required; and reject, unlikely to succeed. Reviewers are invited to summarise the reasons why they consider the manuscript under review should or should not be accepted. Usually these comments are not communicated to the author.

In spite of editors' guidelines, the quality of manuscript reviews varies widely in both length and detail. They may take the form of a recommendation with little supporting argument or advice, or a detailed, closely argued comment over a number of pages supported by "a heavily annotated copy of the article itself" (Tight 2003, p296). Once the reviews have been returned, the editor can make a decision on the future of the manuscript. Where the decision is to reject the manuscript, the reviewers' anonymised comments provide the justification (Beyer, Chanove & Fox 1995; Tight 2003). Where the decision is to revise and resubmit, the comments from the reviewers are used to shape future revisions. If the author of an article in the 'revise and resubmit' category decides to proceed, the process continues for one or more iterations (Tight 2003).

### Criticisms of the peer-review process

Perceived failings of the peer-review process are frequently discussed in any congregation of academics. Criticisms include: the existence of bias, including review bias (Bedeian 2003; Benos et al. 2007; Miller 2006); extensive (and, in some cases, unacceptable) delay (Benos et al. 2007); inability to detect fraud (Benos *et al.* 2007); concern over the impact of the process on authors' egos (Miner 2003); editors' and reviewers' intrusion into the writing process that invades the author's intellectual-property rights (Miner 2003); lack of reliability of the review instrument (Miner 2003); lack of accountability on the part of the reviewers (Epstein 1995; Fine 1996); the degree to which the process has become a game (Bedeian 2003; Macdonald & Kam 2007; 2008; Raelin 2008; Tight 2003); invasive revision demands (Bedeian 2003); reviewers seeing themselves as superiors rather than peers (Miller 2006); and disagreement among reviewers (Miller 2006).

Detailed referee and editor comments or demands for revisions have been criticised by Bedeian as being "so overly invasive as to border on co-authorship" (2003, p335). A consequence of this is that author responses have become detailed and lengthy companion documents that provide additional detailed background, ancillary analyses, references, tables and figures not included in the submitted manuscript (Spector 1998; Bedeian 2003; Seibert 2006).

Bedeian (2003) also examined other factors that undermine the credibility of the review process. He found that of the authors who had successfully published in leading management journals, more than a third reported that recommended revisions in their manuscripts were based on an editor's or a referee's personal preferences; additionally, more than a third had felt pressured to change their manuscript to comply with such personal preferences (Bedeian 2003, p333). Twenty-five percent of authors reported that they had felt obliged to make changes to their manuscript they felt were incorrect (Bedeian 2003).

Frey (2003; 2005) suggests that the requirement to publish places an unacceptable degree of power in the hands of reviewers and editors. This sentiment has been described as providing referees with the power of veto. In justifying this position, Frey (2003; 2005) argues that unless authors meet referees' demands, they are unlikely to have their manuscript published. By extension, referees have the power to make or break an academic career (Bedeian 2003).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This study takes the form of a case study. This approach facilitates a holistic approach to investigating a specific instance or phenomenon in its real-life context. Case studies provide an example of “real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007, p253; Robson 2002). The case-study approach is particularly valuable when the researcher has little control over the events examined (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995). A case study is concerned with a rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995). It provides a chronological narrative of events relevant to the case; blends a description of events with their analysis; focuses on individual actors or groups of actors, seeking to understand their perceptions of events; highlights specific events that are relevant to the case; involves the researcher integrally in the case; and makes an attempt to portray the richness of the case in writing up the report. Case studies are descriptive, detailed and narrowly focused. They provide “data of a richness and detail that are difficult to obtain from broader surveys” (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1988, p28). The strength of a case study is that it observes effects in real contexts, recognising that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects. Examining an individual occurrence or case in detail provides a more in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation; this leads to the formation of more-general hypotheses (van Teijlingen & Hundley 2002). A limitation associated with case-study research is its lack of generalisability, except where other researchers explicitly note the possible application to their own work. Additionally, case studies are not easily verifiable: they may be selective, biased, personal and subjective (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007; Nisbet & Watt 1984). Finally, they are prone to observer bias (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007; Nisbet & Watt 1984).

## THE REVIEW PROCESS

### From Go to Whoa

On 21 August 2009, our manuscript *Accountability, narrative reporting and legitimisation: The case of a New Zealand public benefit entity*, was accepted for publication in a highly ranked journal subject to our attending to a further comment from a reviewer and some minor typographical issues. Our manuscript sought to show how a major New Zealand public-benefit entity uses formal accountability mechanisms and informal reporting to justify its existence. Our research was premised on the view that the accountability relationship for public-benefit entities is broader and more complex than the traditional shareholder-manager relationship in the private sector. We used a longitudinal single-case study of the Department of Conservation (DOC) from its establishment in 1987 to June 2006. The study examined in detail the narrative disclosures in the Department’s annual reports, including the Statement of Service Performance. Controversial items that appeared in the print media between 1 April 1987 and 30 June 2006 were traced through the annual reports to establish whether the Department used impression-management techniques to gain, maintain and repair organisational legitimacy.

### First set of reviewer comments

Overall we found the first review to be fair and the number of issues identified for consideration in line with our expectations. Although both reviewers highlighted weaknesses, they considered our manuscript to have merit, the subject worthy of investigation, the method appropriate, and the study overall as having the potential to contribute to the literature.

Reviewer A<sup>2</sup>, however, considered the manuscript too long, poorly structured, not sufficiently international in its orientation and containing a number of apparent or actual contradictions. The reviewer suggested we explain the basis for adopting the particular timeframes and use them to discuss and analyse our findings using the theoretical perspectives employed.

Reviewer B suggested that we strengthen and clarify our objective, and change the title and abstract to improve their relevance to the content of the manuscript. Additionally, the ‘gap’ in the literature was not adequately identified, while our section on research design and method was too brief. Reviewer B’s main concern was with the structure and organisation of the Results and discussion. Her suggestion to improve reader understanding of the significance of the findings follows:

*The current presentation of information in order of occurrence (rather than significance to the research objectives) has the effect of diminishing the impact of the evidence. In addition, the relevance of the ‘discrete timeframes’ identified in this section (which appear to peter out after the fourth or fifth period) is not clear. This could be a good way to compare and contrast the data, but the impact is lost due to the lack of distinction (other than time) between the categories. An alternative ordering of information (i.e. in accordance with the legitimisation strategies identified in the ‘theoretical perspective’ section rather than a time sequence) could provide a more meaningful framework for the interpretation of the findings.*

### Second Set of Reviewer Comments<sup>3</sup>

While Reviewer A acknowledged that we had added a research ‘objective’ section, the research question should be brought closer to the front of the manuscript. The reviewer recommended restructuring the manuscript to “leave the ‘theoretical perspectives’ section to an overview of legitimacy theory as the key lens that has been adopted for interpreting the findings”. Reviewer A suggested that the different legitimising strategies that may be applied based on the work of Lindblom (1994) be considered earlier. He also emphasised the need for the nature and importance of the overall findings to indicate what, if anything, was added to the theory.

Reviewer B also brought up specific problems with the manuscript. For example, she wrote, “Objective is not clearly articulated and fails to clear boundaries for the arguments” within the manuscript, and pointed out poor structure and sequencing of information. The lack of a clear and justified objective meant that the subsequent discussion lacked impact, and consequently failed to provide a significant contribution to the existing literature. The ‘Theoretical perspectives’ and ‘Research design’ sections contained too much information from the case itself, with insufficient background and context derived from the supporting literature. She recommended that stronger justification for the choice of research design and articulation of

<sup>2</sup> To avoid any confusion in the paper Reviewer A is described in the masculine while Reviewer B is considered feminine.

<sup>3</sup> At this stage the co-author of the paper that is the subject of this case study had completed her Master’s degree and decided that an academic career was not in her immediate future.



research methods, including the findings of prior research from which this manuscript was emerging and an outline of the specific research methods adopted, be provided. The reviewer's concern with the 'Results and discussion' section was in understanding how and why the time frames used in the study related to particular issues of accountability. Explaining why the particular periods were chosen, together with a brief summary within each section of the key issues of accountability, would provide clarification. Our discussion of legitimacy findings was also problematic. To better identify and clarify the findings, Reviewer B suggested that the identified legitimising strategies, rather than the incidents to which the strategies were applied, should be used as headings.

### Third set of reviewer comments

Reviewer A acknowledged that we had accepted his recommendation and moved from using accountability as a theoretical framework. Although our objective statement was well written and informative, the reviewer requested that it be brought to the beginning of the manuscript. Reviewer A found the manuscript's new title to be too broad and suggested two alternative titles. He also suggested that controversial issues discussed in our manuscript should be highlighted in the introduction. His main criticism continued to focus on our discussion of the results, where he felt we had not addressed a key criticism of the previous manuscript. He suggested that our response seemed "to relay the impression that they have lost energy or inspiration in giving an in-depth overview of the findings across the five controversial issues".

Reviewer B also noted that the significant changes we made had improved the manuscript's readability. However, problems still remained with the overall structure and flow of information within the 'Results and discussion' and 'Conclusion' sections, where our discussion was considered naive. A more comprehensive introduction to the 'Results and discussion' section was recommended; this would facilitate an understanding of how Lindblom's legitimisation strategies were used to inform the rationale for the non-financial disclosures made. Additionally, Reviewer B suggested that within each sub-section, links should be made to our overall perception of how these strategies attempted to gain, maintain or repair legitimacy. Finally, it was suggested we consult Suchman (1995) prior to undertaking further revision.

### Fourth Set of Reviewer Comments

Reviewer A found our aims/objectives statements in the abstract to be better focused, although they could be better outlined, and provided suggestions for how this could be achieved, along with a suggestion for alternative wording to clarify our introductory paragraph.

Reviewer A noted our introduction of Suchman's management-legitimacy framework, but considered this major amendment to be a strength and a weakness. Our analysis, particularly relating to gaining and maintaining legitimacy, was considered too concise or simplistic, which diminished its credibility. He recommended including an introduction explaining how Suchman and Lindblom had been integrated for the purpose of analysing our findings.

At this stage Reviewer B appeared to have second thoughts on the appropriateness of the framework used in the manuscript. Having included Suchman's framework into the manuscript, Reviewer B appeared uncertain that her original suggestion was appropriate. In attempting to articulate her position, Reviewer B argued that

*the incorporation of Suchman's framework of legitimacy has improved the reader's understanding of the notion and application of legitimacy, but I am not convinced that the two views (Suchman/Lindblom) are interchangeable, and as a result the discussion of the findings is confusing and therefore unconvincing. There needs to be a better integration of the Suchman /Lindblom views of legitimacy or abandonment of the Lindblom approach.*

Reviewer B found it useful at this stage to provide further recommendations on the structure of the manuscript. She suggested that the

*legitimation strategies undertaken by the DOC could be more effectively discussed over time and collectively rather than as separate actions surrounding a specific state of legitimacy as a result of a particular 'issue'. Discussion of legitimating activities surrounding each 'issue' is problematic as some events occurred at a point in time (Cave Creek tragedy) whereas others occurred over a period of time (1080 poison). The identification of whether particular strategies were used repeatedly or in isolation and why they were undertaken would be easier to determine if the discussion identified it in the context of the overall state of legitimacy the DOC was experiencing at that time.*

## In Our Defence

### *Stock Standard Review – No Need for Concern*

Our initial submission had used a series of timeframes we identified as coinciding with changes in the nature and extent of disclosures made by DOC in their annual reports. This had given rise to the original title of our manuscript, *Reviewing the changing face of financial reporting: The case of a public benefit entity*. Accountability was the primary framework for our study, as the annual reports of public-benefit entities are “one of the most important means by which the department discharges its accountability to members of Parliament and the public they represent” (New Zealand Treasury 2009, p2). Legitimacy and impression-management issues were considered within this overall framework.

Although both reviewers identified problems with the ‘Results and discussion’ section, their suggestions as to how we should proceed conflicted. As we had initially made use of timeframes, we retained this framework and followed the suggestions of Reviewer A. A table detailing the timeframes and our rationale for using them was provided in our response to the reviewers. We believed that this approach would be acceptable to Reviewer B, as her comment, “This could be a good way to compare and contrast the data”, meant that the original ordering was acceptable even though she believed additional impact could be achieved through an alternative ordering of information.

## The First Inklings of Problems

In spite of our attending to Reviewer B's concerns about the brevity of the research design and method sections at the first review stage, we were again unsuccessful in satisfying this reviewer. She required a stronger justification for the choice of the research design and a better articulation of our research method. The reviewer explained that the method should be linked to its ability to

provide evidence to the research question, as well as provide readers with enough information to inform them of exactly how the research would be undertaken.

At the second review stage Reviewer B reiterated her suggestion made at the first review stage that it would be more effective to use the identified legitimising strategies as headings rather than the incidents to which the strategies were applied. Although Reviewer A had not raised this issue in the second review (given that we had followed his suggestion) we were conflicted. We therefore identified Reviewer B as being the one most difficult to satisfy, meaning that should we wish to have our manuscript published, we would need to abandon our original structure and adopt that recommended by Reviewer B.

### Moving the Goal Posts: Changing Titles and Introducing New Literature

From the comments received at the third review stage we got the feeling that the reviewers were becoming impatient with our efforts. Reviewer A had become exasperated with our revision of the discussion section, and had not accepted the new title of our manuscript. Although we accepted the reviewer's comments about the discussion section, we did not understand it. Rather than seeking further clarification we accepted the comment and resolved to do better next time.

Providing a manuscript title acceptable to both reviewers was also proving challenging. Although Reviewer A did not appear to have a problem with the title of our original submission, Reviewer B found it misleading. Unfortunately, our change caused Reviewer A some concern, as he thought the new title was unnecessarily narrow and misrepresented the apparent focus of the manuscript. Two titles were suggested as being more appropriate. We accepted Reviewer A's position and changed the title. However, we did not accept either recommendation specifically, as they were inconsistent with the journal's requirement that a title contain no more than eight words. This was an unfortunate error on our part. Reviewer A considered our new title to be too broad, and not properly justified or supported. The acerbic comment that our choice was "too grandiose in the context of the specific case study paper which has been written" clearly let us know that our efforts were unappreciated. We did not make the same mistake again and adopted one of the titles recommended by the reviewer even though the word count was almost twice that permitted.

At the second review stage we had adopted Reviewer B's suggestion that the legitimising strategies be used as headings rather than the incidents to which the strategies were applied. At the third review stage Reviewer B recommended a more comprehensive introduction to our 'Results and discussion' section to provide a clear understanding of how Lindblom's legitimisation strategies were used to inform the rationale for the annual report disclosures made by DOC. The reviewer further suggested we consult Suchman (1995) prior to any revision. Although we were concerned that this development had not been raised earlier, we largely rewrote the manuscript to incorporate Suchman's legitimisation strategies. The headings within the discussion section were also changed to comply with Reviewer B's requirements.

Even after the third review we felt that Reviewer B either still did not understand what we were trying to achieve, or had failed to read our manuscript properly. The comment "If it is the informal reporting mechanisms (i.e. voluntary disclosures) that are the focus of the discussion then perhaps it is not necessary for the author(s) to describe and explain the formal accounts disclosures", caused us some concern. We were examining DOC's use of formal and informal reporting mechanisms to gain, maintain and repair its legitimacy; we therefore did not

feel that the section dealing with DOC's accountability framework for financial reporting should be deleted.

At the third review stage it was our frustration with the process that caused us to amend our strategy. Although we would continue to largely fall in line with reviewer requirements, we also started to stand up for ourselves. In defending our position we drew Reviewer B's attention to the formal reporting mechanisms used by DOC to gain or repair legitimacy. We also drew her attention to specific pages in the manuscript that discussed the formal accountability disclosures. In spite of our frustration that the reviewer had not considered this in earlier reviews, our response was couched in language designed not to alienate or offend her.

Incorporating Reviewer B's requirements at the third review stage provided Reviewer A with the opportunity to identify further problems with our manuscript. Reviewer A noted the introduction of Suchman's management-legitimacy framework, but argued that this 'major amendment' had become a strength and weakness of the current revision in that although it provided a more structured means of analysis, "parts of it appeared contrived".

Attempting to deal with Reviewer B's comments received at the fourth review stage was difficult. Four issues in particular gave rise to our concern. The first was Reviewer B's apparent change of mind about the appropriateness of the framework used in the manuscript. Now that Suchman had been incorporated into the manuscript at her suggestion, Reviewer B now appeared conflicted. Her comment, "I am not convinced that the two views (Suchman/Lindblom) are interchangeable", caused us some concern. The suggestion that we consider abandoning the Lindblom approach caused not just concern, but anguish. From the outset we had made use of Lindblom as the theoretical foundation of the manuscript and neither reviewer had expressed any concern with the appropriateness of its use over three previous iterations. Having now also incorporated Suchman's framework, we found it disconcerting that this reviewer now appeared confused.

Second, we were bewildered by her comment, "It is suggested that the legitimization strategies undertaken by the DOC could be more effectively discussed over time and collectively rather than as separate actions surrounding a specific state of legitimacy as a result of a particular 'issue'". This apparently thoughtful comment was at odds with the suggestion she had made at the first review stage, which had been incorporated into the manuscript at the second review stage. Third, the reviewer considered that

*[i]t is unclear from the paper whether the DOC had ever established legitimacy amongst the stakeholders (if the media views can be used as a proxy for this). Media criticisms serve as evidence to indicate that the DOC has never been viewed by the public without suspicion. If this is the case, it might be necessary for all of the discussion to be focussed on the DOC's attempts to gain legitimacy.*

We responded that we did not believe it appropriate to focus solely on DOC's attempts to gain legitimacy. In particular we were uncertain how DOC's response to the Cave Creek disaster (which involved the loss of life) could ever be viewed as an attempt to gain legitimacy.

Finally, Reviewer B suggested that under the headings 'Gaining legitimacy' 'Maintaining legitimacy' and 'Repairing legitimacy' we include some examples of the sorts of actions that would be expected to reflect each state. We considered this suggestion to be at best unconstructive and at worst absurd. We felt that she was now deliberately seeking to identify additional issues requiring attention. Requiring clarification of 'exploitative activities' when the term had been used in each version of the manuscript provided evidence of this.

It was the comments received at this stage of the review process that enabled us to develop some fortitude. We took what we considered to be the next reasonable step and addressed our concerns to the editor. We sought his guidance on how best respond to the unhelpful and contradictory points raised. In response to Reviewer B's suggestion that we include some examples of actions that would reflect efforts to gain, maintain and repair legitimacy, we posed the rhetorical question: "Is the reviewer expecting the author(s) to place themselves in DOC's position and provide some examples of what they would do in each situation?" We reiterated our position that the focus of the manuscript was DOC's specific actions to gain, maintain and repair legitimacy in response to issues raised by the media. After considering the comments made in our 'Memorandum of Changes', the editor acknowledged our frustration but advised us to take a more measured approach with our responses.

As the door had not yet been slammed shut on our efforts, we accepted the suggestions and amended our 'Memorandum of Changes' so as not to offend either reviewer and jeopardise our chance of a high-quality publication.

## DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

At the outset we made the decision to submit our manuscript to a highly ranked<sup>4</sup> journal, hoping that the maxim that manuscripts sent to high-quality journals are more likely to be reviewed by well-established academics would apply to our submission. This would mean that even if our manuscript were rejected we could expect to receive some useful comments. Perhaps we were unrealistic to expect that if the manuscript passed the initial editor review and was not rejected by the reviewers, two revisions would see the manuscript accepted for publication.

To maximise the chances of acceptance we initially adopted the strategy of accepting the reviewers' demands and 'fall in line' (Bedeian 2004). We incorporated all comments, suggestions or recommendations into the manuscript. In adopting this strategy we tacitly entered into a 'Faustian bargain' with the reviewers and ultimately the journal editor. We accepted that this strategy would mean that our manuscript would be subject to significant revisions before it was ever published. In other words, to obtain publication in a highly ranked journal we were, according to the rationale provided by Bedeian (2004) and Frey (2003), prepared to engage in intellectual prostitution. What we did not anticipate was the extent of the changes or the difficulties we would experience in dealing with the reviewers' comments.

Dealing with conflicting reviewer requirements was difficult. At the first review, Reviewer A suggested we explain the basis for adopting the timeframes used in the discussion. Reviewer B, however, considered that ordering the information in accordance with the legitimisation strategies *could* (our emphasis) provide a more meaningful framework to interpret the findings. At the second review stage we felt that we had to comply with Reviewer B. This has been described as complying with the subjective judgment of a particular referee (Bedeian 2003). Even though we felt Reviewer B had good intentions, nevertheless we thought she was biased as there was more than one way to address the issue. This is confirmed by her change of mind at a later review, where she argued that the legitimisation strategies could be more effectively discussed over time.

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<sup>4</sup> The journal is regarded internationally as a leading journal in the accounting discipline. It challenges conventional wisdom, explores alternatives and offers new perspectives. It was ranked A\* on the 2010 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) journal-ranking list.

At the first review stage Reviewer A criticised our original submission as being too long. By the end of the second rewrite stage we were able to reassure the reviewers that restructuring had reduced the length of our manuscript by approximately 3400 words. We found it ironic, then, that Reviewer B's suggestion at the third rewrite stage to incorporate Suchman's legitimisation strategies was primarily responsible for the 31 per cent increase in the overall length of our manuscript.

By the end of the third rewrite we were frustrated and disillusioned with the process. We felt that each revision identified further issues not considered in previous reviews. The requirement to include Suchman should ideally have been made at the first, but no later than the second, rewrite stage. By the fourth rewrite stage we had become cynical. We were now of the opinion that Reviewer B was taking her gatekeeping duties too seriously, as we had been unable to satisfy her changing demands. Depending on one's viewpoint we had 'fallen in line', played the game or prostituted ourselves intellectually. We had attended to all the issues raised by the reviewer, amended the structure of the manuscript in line with her requirements, adopted the subheadings she had suggested, and undertaken a rewrite to incorporate the literature she had recommended. We felt that the goal posts were continually being moved; perhaps uncharitably, we felt that we were no longer driving the direction of *our* manuscript. We half-expected a co-authorship request.

A criticism of the review process identified by Bedeian (1996; 2003) is that editor and reviewer comments have become more detailed and demanding to the extent that they rival the length of a submitted manuscript. While the reviewer comments were demanding, our experience does not bear Bedeian's point out. Although our response to the fourth review was particularly extensive, it fell short of the length of the manuscript itself. Consistent with Bedeian (1996 and 2003), though, we felt obliged to include additional material in our response at the fourth rewrite stage to support our position that we had not included in our manuscript. This included a figure from our original submission to remind Reviewer B of the complex relationship DOC has with its stakeholders. Additionally, to satisfy the reviewer's concern over whether Suchman and Lindblom could be viewed as interchangeable, we included a matrix illustrating why we disagreed with her position.

At each review we meticulously attended to each concern and provided a 'Memorandum of Changes' to our manuscript. In addition, before each resubmission we asked a long-suffering colleague (and member of the journal's editorial board) to review our manuscript and our 'Memorandum of Changes'. After the third review stage we approached another member of the editorial board for their view. Their feedback resulted in further changes to both documents.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to provide a personal account and reflection while sharing our experience of navigating the peer-review process. When we initially set out to write this paper we sought to provide an irreverent or light-hearted overview of our attempts to overcome the barriers we saw as conspiring to ensure our manuscript would never be published. This paper was therefore cathartic. We were able to reflect on the individual reviews, our role in the process and our shortcomings, particularly in how we undertook the earlier revisions.

There are numerous reasons why manuscripts are rejected by journal editors. They include: inadequate level of development for the manuscripts submitted; reviewers failing to

clearly communicate concerns to authors; authors failing to carefully attend to reviewer concerns when undertaking revisions; and reviewers unreasonably shifting their requirements for revisions at each evaluation (Clark, Floyd & Wright 2006; Weber 2002). Clearly in the submission of our manuscript and in our response to reviewers we committed a number of these sins.

In spite of taking what we considered reasonable care in preparing our manuscript, and in spite of the significant investment in terms of both time and costs, navigating the review process was challenging. We undertook four major reviews prior to our manuscript being accepted. This was more than we had expected. To obtain a publication in a highly ranked journal we initially adopted the strategy of incorporating all reviewer suggestions or recommendations into our manuscript. Only at the third review stage did we start to stand up for ourselves. When disagreeing with the referees we selected only those battles we felt we could win.

While the peer-review process is essential in academic publishing, the process clearly delays the dissemination of research results to target audiences. This can be discouraging to junior and intermediate staff planning an academic career and can result in research findings never being published.

Irrespective of the initial merits of the manuscript we originally submitted to the journal, the editor provided us with every opportunity to improve it. The two reviewers tried to provide an initial positive response and encouraged us to undertake further revisions. The reviewers provided additional information to assist us, including the identification of literature. We found a number of their comments to be useful, helping us clarify the objective, justify our choice of research design and appropriately articulate our research methods. Our 'Results and discussion' section became more coherent with each rewrite. However, the longer the review process dragged out, the more frustrated we became with some of the issues raised. In spite of any implied criticisms of how our manuscript was reviewed we are confident the input of the reviewers enabled us to significantly improve it. Although difficulties are always likely to exist in the review process, being aware of them will make future reviews easier to manage.

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